



# CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

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March 17, 2010

## **Race to the Top - One lap down, one (tough) lap to go in Washington, DC**



We learned last week that Washington, DC made the first cut in the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition, President Obama's \$4 billion investment in education reform. One of 16 finalists among 41 state applicants, we presented our case today to the Department of Education, and are in the running for an award that will be announced next month.

### **Bi-Partisanship in Education**

Americans are asking for a bi-partisan approach from the federal government to solve the country's toughest problems. I am pleased that in education, bi-partisan reform is alive and well. For the first time I can remember, a Democratic administration is fully embracing ideas like competition, merit pay for teachers and principals, choices for parents through charter schools, and accountability for charter performance. The president not only added \$4 billion to the education budget, but he also factored competition into the allocation.

## What's so great about competition in education?

I believe competition is a huge step forward in making public education the great equalizer it is supposed to be. Competition has moved Americans to astonishing achievements for centuries, and children in DC have already begun to benefit from its capacity to make us better at what we do.

For example, for decades public school enrollment was in sharp decline as charter schools drew parents away from DCPS, which lost 10,000 students between 1985 and 2005. Spurred by the competition, the DC Council voted to make the mayor accountable for results instead of diluting accountability across a school board, which had been the case for decades.

The Council also gave him the authority to make the decisions he believed were in the best interest of students. Just two years after this change, for the first time in decades, DCPS enrollment remained steady as achievement scores improved. This achievement has everything to do with competition.

## Why is Washington, DC the best place for RTTT dollars?

We are up against some tough competitors. In the spirit of competition, here are just a few of the reasons we think Washington, DC should win.

- DC is small compared to states, so RTTT-driven reforms will have an incredibly broad and much faster impact on children than other states can expect.
- With the mayor accountable for public schools in DC, instead of the school board structure that can slow down action in other states, we are in the best position to implement positive change—decisively, quickly and effectively.
- One of President Obama's primary objectives with RTTT is to close the achievement gap that falls along racial lines. In DCPS, 79 percent of our students are African-American, and 12 percent are Hispanic. We are better poised to close the achievement gap with RTTT funds than any



of our competitors. Students in DC would move the president closer to his objective than students in any competing state could.

- The president has emphasized the importance of good charter schools to spur competition and results. Washington, DC has one of the most diverse systems of charter options in the country, and the DC Council and mayor are way ahead of other states in their efforts to build the structures for charter school accountability.
- We are not just meeting RTTT objectives. We are exceeding them!
  - The president expects states to implement turnaround solutions for the bottom five percent of schools. DCPS is going beyond that, applying turnaround efforts to the **bottom 20 percent of schools**. Lowest achieving charters will be closed altogether.
  - RTTT dollars would support [IMPACT, a bold new teacher assessment system](#) that includes what every school system is supposed to produce: student achievement. Fifty percent of this assessment considers tested students' academic growth with a teacher, with the remainder assessed through multiple classroom observations and conferences with the teacher.
  - With more nuanced data systems and their educational applications emerging, teachers can use student data to progress beyond what was possible just a few years ago. It will require training for teachers to apply these advancements to their practice, and RTTT dollars would provide this training through a “data lead” for every school in DCPS.
  - RTTT dollars would hit DC at the perfect time to maximize their impact. While many states began to create RTTT objectives with the announcement of the grant, we won't need to use funds to build momentum. Instead funds would move quickly to create measurable results in student achievement.
  - Students in DC are progressing at an unprecedented pace! When compared to other state competitors on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, [last year DC students led the country in math growth](#). Eighth graders grew at three times the national average, and our fourth were graders the only group in the country to see gains in every subgroup, from African American students to students on free and reduced lunch.

Thanks to a significant effort from [State Superintendent Kerri Briggs](#) and her staff, [Deputy Mayor Victor Reinoso](#) and his staff, [DC Council Chair Vincent Gray](#), [Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton](#) and others, Washington, DC has put together a competitive application. We believe it shows that Washington, DC deserves first place!

We still have some nail biting to do before April, and we do not underestimate the formidable competition we are up against. We have the best of this city's work in this race, from students and their teachers, to the principals leading them. Our RTTT proposal shows what we're capable of planning together. Winning these funds will show what we're capable of doing together.

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